

UJIA Department of Informal Education

Healthy Living and Sport: The importance of caring for your body (in Judaism) vs 'your body is a temple' (Christian idea)

Written by Shelley Harrod

Aims:

- To address the issue of what constitutes 'healthy living' and to create a safe environment in which participants can openly discuss body image.
- To explore Jewish texts surrounding the body and exercise.
- To explore the notion of your body as a temple.
- To educate young people about the Jewish commandment 'to teach your child how to swim'.

Depending on how long your activity is, you can do all of or parts of the following activities and handouts. The idea is that you can choose all or parts of this session to run as a facilitator. If you have 2 hours, you will have time to do all of the activities. The timings are just a rough guideline and you should be flexible and allow yourself to go with the direction of the group.

Outline and timings:

1. Trigger 1 - song game (5 minutes)
2. Trigger 2 – Jewish sports stars (10 minutes)
3. Method 1 – Incentives for healthy living – What makes you feel healthy and good? (20 minutes)
4. Method 2 – Healthy Harry Handout (10 minutes)
5. Method 3 – Chevruta (one on one learning) – Jewish sources and texts (35 minutes)
6. Method 4 – Healthy living. Is your body a temple? Judaism and Christianity (5 minutes)
7. Method 5 – Emotional, spiritual and physical well-being activities (15 minutes)
8. Method 6 – The essence of prayer and the morning blessings handout (10 minutes)
9. Method 7 - Sikkum/Conclusion (5 minutes)

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Trigger 1 – Song game (5 minutes):

Play 1 quick round of the song game. Split the participants in to small groups of 4 or 5 people. Give them 1 minute in their groups to come up with as many songs with the word 'body' in or any 'body parts'. For example, Justin Timberlake - "Rock your body", "If you're happy and you know it clap your hands...", Jackson 5 - "Shake your body" (Let's dance, let's shout... Shake your body down to the ground) etc.

Trigger 2 – Jewish sports stars (10 minutes):

Ask the group to name Jewish sports stars they know.

Split the group into 2 teams. Each team gets one of the following stars, they have 5mins to collect as much info about their star as poss from their team and fill in their card. Once this is complete, one representative goes up to the front with their card, and plays 20 questions with the other team until they guess who the sports star is.

Name: Yossi Benayoun

Age: 31

Profession: Israeli footballer. Currently plays for Chelsea (since 2010), played for West Ham and Liverpool.

Family Life:

All other information:



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Name: Harold Abrahams

D.O.B: 15 December 1899 – 14 January 1978

Profession: Jewish British athlete. He was Olympic champion in 1924 in the 100 metres sprint, a feat depicted in the 1981 movie Chariots of Fire.

Family Life:

All other information:



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Method

1. Incentives for healthy living – What makes you feel healthy and good? (20 minutes)

Explain that we are going to look at healthy living and the importance of caring for our bodies. What makes you feel healthy and good?

Write up the following questions on a board or on flip chart paper. Get participants in to smaller groups (maybe the same groups they were in for the song game trigger) and allow them to reflect/share answers.

OR

Cut up the following questions and put them in a hat (print a set of questions per group) get them to pick questions out and answer them one by one and answer them as a group.

- How long do you want and expect to live for?
Is your life expectancy related to your physical wellbeing or health or is it something random and far away?
- What do you do to have a healthy/active lifestyle?
How much of this is not enforced?
- Do you exercise because you want to or because school and teachers and/or family members enforce it?
- What is a healthy outlook on life?
Is it something which just happens to us or can we have an effect on the way we act on this?
Do you think that you have a healthy outlook on life?
If so where does this come from and what do you do to reinforce it?
Is your health a priority?
- Have you ever thought of Jews as particularly physically active people? Why/why not?
Do you think that physical activity is prioritised in the Jewish Community?
Is physical activity seen as a religious priority/of religious importance or benefit?
Where do you see physical activity being pushed in the Jewish community and what aspects of Judaism/Jewish life do not prioritise Sport?
- Do any of you play in Maccabi sports teams or know anyone that has participated in the Maccabbiah games?

Once they have had 10-15 minutes to discuss all of the questions, come back together as a group to discuss and share ideas.

Ask the question: What kinds of things make us feel healthy and good?

2. Healthy Harry Handout (10 minutes)

Explain that the idea of the body shape is to fill it with all of the things that could contribute towards a healthy lifestyle, things you would enjoy doing, things you could do more of if you had enough time, support you would need from friends, family, financial support, sports kits, travel etc.

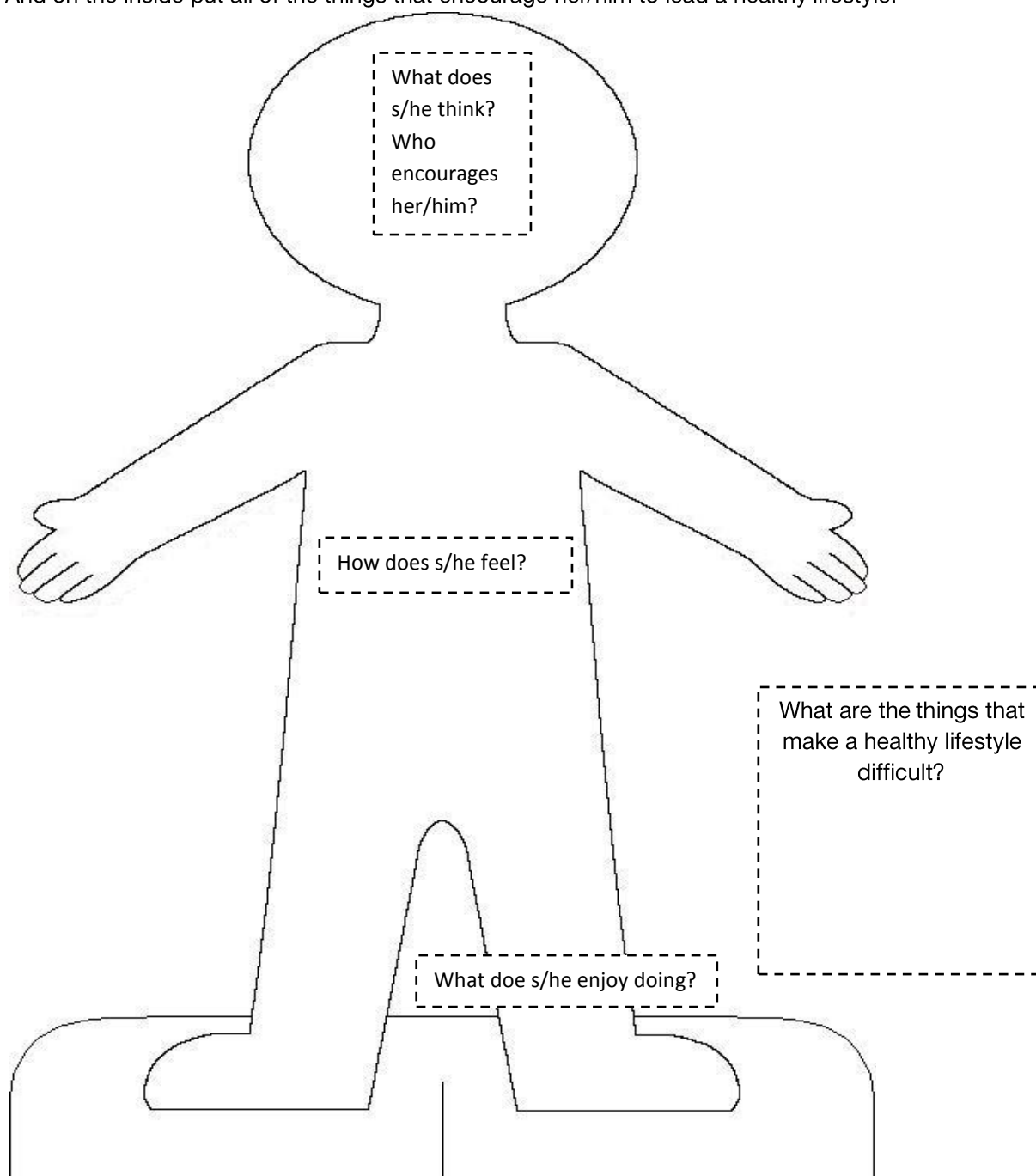
The following handout allows the participants to think about healthy living on a personal level by considering the constraints and the benefits of leading a healthy lifestyle.

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Healthy Harry Handout

On the outside put all of the things that make a healthy lifestyle difficult, for example, distractions, things that other people prioritise for you, things that stand in your way of being healthy - tempting food etc.

And on the inside put all of the things that encourage her/him to lead a healthy lifestyle.



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3. Chevruta (one on one learning) – Jewish sources and texts (35 minutes)

Hand out the following text sheets for small group learning. Note that facilitator notes have been marked in **red**. Discuss and come back together to share amongst the whole group.

Jewish sources – Caring for your Body

1. “And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them.” (Bereshit, Chapter 1, verse 27)

Questions:

What do you understand by this?

What significance does it have that we have been created in the image of God? Does it make you feel any differently about your physical appearance?

1. Identify a list of great habits that a girl and/or boy can have in order to take care of her/his body on a daily basis (eg, adequate sleep, proper nutrition, exercise, keeping hydrated etc)
2. Discuss what it means to ‘care for our bodies’

Explain that it is our responsibility to care for our body as a ‘gift’ throughout our lives. Our body is a wonderful tool.

2. Judaism teaches us about healing of the soul and healing of the body, both being critical for healthy living- Refuat hanefesh v’refuat haguf

Questions:

Discuss what heals the body and what heals the soul?

What can you do to support friends/family in pain? Where can they turn to?

What is the connection between a healthy soul and a healthy body?

What do you think about the phrase ‘mind over matter’? or Positive Mental Attitude? Is it true? Can you achieve more physically when you concentrate on the power of your mind and when you nourish your feelings?

3. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote, “Only if the body is healthy is it an efficient instrument for the spirit’s activity” (Horeb ch. 62, sec. 428).

In the Mishneh Torah, Rambam explains the importance of keeping to a strict regimen. Similarly, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook insisted that physical education be an important part of a curriculum. He wrote, “When Jewish children will be strong, sound and healthy, the air of the world will become holy and pure.”

Questions:

Do you think that when you feel healthy you are more able to invest in spiritual activity?

Does your physical wellbeing have anything to do with your ability to pray and to connect with God?

If you felt clear and clean physically do you think you might be able to concentrate more fully?

4. Perhaps the most famous rabbinic statement about parents' obligations to children appears in the [Talmud \(Kiddushin 29a\)](#), which provides a list of those things after birth which a parent is obligated to provide for a child:

"A father is obligated to do the following for his son: to circumcise him, to redeem him if he is a first born, to teach him Torah, to find him a wife, and to teach him a trade. Others say: teaching him how to swim as well."

Questions:

How do you interpret this? What are the priorities of parents? Which seem obvious to you and which surprise you? Do you think they stand for something wider and if so, what?

Many now interpret this passage to mean that parents, both mother and father, are obligated to do these things for their child. We can see from this statement that rabbinic tradition is concerned not only with intellectual and spiritual competency, but with practical knowledge which would assure survival. Interestingly enough, love for one's child is left off this list. Perhaps this is because talmudic law usually addresses areas which the Rabbis felt needed highlighting. They felt love of children was not likely to be neglected.

Do you agree with this?

5. “The body being healthy is of the ways of the Lord, for it is impossible to understand or know the knowledge of the Creator while unwell. Therefore, one should keep away from things which destroy the body, and accustom oneself to healthy and curing matters, which are as follows: One should never eat unless one is hungry, nor drink unless one is thirsty, and nor should one hold oneself back for even a single moment from relieving oneself, for whenever one feels the need to pass water or to defecate, one should do so immediately.” (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot 4:1)

Questions:

What happens when we deprive ourselves of proper nutrients or proper care?

Why do we need to care for our bodies, aren’t they ours to use?

The way this passage relates to eating and drinking is about nourishing ourselves rather than abusing/looking after our bodies. It is about natural and basic needs.

6. “The Sages stated another general rule about bodily health: Whenever one exercises and works but is not satisfied with what one eats and one's bowels are healthy, one will not become sick and one's strength will increase, even if one eats bad foods.” (Maimonides, Hilchot Deot, Chapter 4, halacha 14)

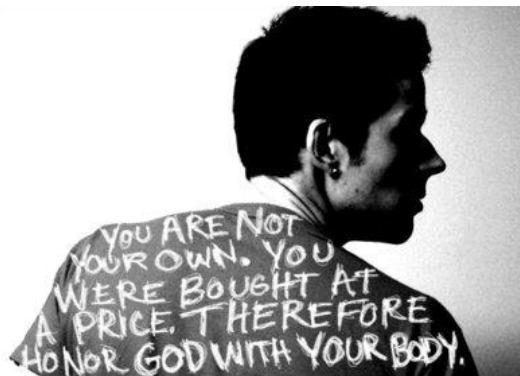
So.. we can see Rambam/Maimonides agreeing with the importance of exercise to keep fit and looking after our bodies.

This statement seems to prioritise bodily health and nourishment over enjoyment of food. It takes us back to the basic need of eating to be nourished and to have energy rather than as an activity which we enjoy.

4. Healthy living. Is your body a temple? Judaism and Christianity (5 minutes)

Hand out the following sheet for individual reflection and come back together and discuss.

Healthy living and the importance of looking after your body – Is your body a temple? Does Judaism agree with Christianity?



How do these 3 images make you feel?



Christian idea: Your Body Is the Temple of the Holy Spirit

Does this agree with Judaism?

"19 What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost [Holy Spirit] which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?"

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20 For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." (Corinthians 6:19-20, Your Body, His Temple)

"Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor imprint any marks upon you: I am the LORD." (Leviticus, Chapter 19, verse 28)

Prohibition against tattooing

5. Emotional, spiritual and physical well-being activities(15 minutes)

Explain that well-being encompasses all our parts, not just the physical body. When our emotions are in turmoil or our mind is bombarded with obsessive thoughts our health is compromised. It is important to create balance in your life by nurturing your whole person, which includes spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical needs.

Activity:

Ask participants to draw a diagram/triangle showing the connections between emotional, spiritual and physical well-being. Which comes first? Which affects the other? What nourishes each thing individually and which do you prioritise? Which do you need to spend more time nourishing? Try to write one aim for each type of wellbeing?

So... Is Our Body, Our Temple?

This miraculous body, given to us at birth, requires proper rest, nutritious food, good hygiene, and adequate exercise, not only to support our physical health, but also to regulate our vital energies. This sets the best possible bodily stage for spiritual practice. Bodily vigor can translate to an active, energetic approach to the inner life. Furthermore, responsible treatment of our own body forms a crucial part of a responsible attitude toward life as a whole. Responsibility stands as one of the highest spiritual qualities and begins with our own body. To help maximize our spiritual possibilities, we can work to maximize our physical vitality.

Given its remarkable resilience, we need not fear using our body, making demands of it. Given the fact of our body, we need to accept it as is, adapting to rather than dwelling on its inevitable shortcomings.

Ask participants the question: How can we get physical for fun?

Get them to call out ideas and write them up for all to see.

Your body needs exercise and real foods. Take walks, dance in your living room, garden, golf...try to get moving for your heart, not to decrease the

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size of your bottom! You may lose weight and you may not, but your body will be stronger, your stress will be lower, and you'll feel better.

Activity idea:

Split group up in to teams and get them to make adverts for physical fun? Create a competition.

6. The essence of prayer and the morning blessings handout (10 minutes)

Hand out the following text sheets for discussion.

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The importance of the morning blessings – The essence of prayer

The following two prayers can be said upon awakening:

1. **Asher Yatzar** (gives thanks to God for creating the complexity of the human body)

In this blessing we express our gratitude to Hashem for the fact that our bodies continue to function properly. The Asher Yatzar prayer is over two thousand years old.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּחִכְמָה
וּבְרָא בּוֹ נִקְבִּים וְנִקְבִּים
חִלּוּלִים חִלּוּלִים ,
גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לִפְנֵי כֹסֶא כְבוֹדְךָ
שָׂאֵם יִפְתָּח אֶחָד מֵהֶם אוֹ יִסְתָּם אֶחָד מֵהֶם
אִי אֶפְשֶׁר לְהִתְקִים וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֶיךָ
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה " , רוֹפֵא כָּל בָּשָׂר וּמַפְלִיא

Blessed are You, HaShem, our God, King of the Universe, Who fashioned man with wisdom and created within him many openings and many cavities. It is obvious and known before

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Your throne of glory that if but one of them were to be ruptured or but one of them were to be blocked it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You for even one hour. Blessed are You, HaShem, who heals all flesh and acts wondrously.

Questions:

Have you heard of this prayer before? What does it mean?

Why do you think it has been included in the morning prayers as opposed to other services?

What is our responsibility in working with God to sustain our bodies?

2. **Elohai Nishamah** (we are grateful for the gift of our soul)

אֱלֹהֵי, נִשְׁמָה שְׁנַתָּת בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא. אַתָּה בְּרָאתָהּ, אַתָּה יִצְרָתָהּ, אַתָּה
נִפְחָתָהּ בִּי, וְאַתָּה מְשַׁמְרָהּ בְּקִרְבִּי, וְאַתָּה עֲתִיד לְטַלָּהּ מִמֶּנִּי, וּלְהַחְיֶיהָ
בִּי לְעֵתִיד לָבוֹא. כָּל זְמוֹן שֶׁהַנִּשְׁמָה בְּקִרְבִּי, מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי
וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי, רַבּוֹן כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים, אֲדוֹן כָּל הַנִּשְׁמוֹת. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ,
הַמַּחְיֶה נִשְׁמוֹת לְפָגְרִים מֵתִים.

My God, the soul You placed within me is pure. You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me, and You guard it while it is within me. One day You will take it from me, and restore it to me in the time to come. As long as the soul is within me, I will thank You, HaShem my God and God of my ancestors, Master of all works, Lord of all souls. Blessed are You, HaShem, who restores souls to lifeless bodies. My God, the soul You placed within me is pure. You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me, and You guard it while it is within me. One day You will take it from me, and restore it to me in the time to come. As long as the soul is within me, I will thank You, HaShem my God and God of my ancestors, Master of all works, Lord of all souls. Blessed are You, HaShem, who restores souls to lifeless bodies.

Questions:

However you define the soul, do you ever question whether that essence in another human or yourself is good?

Do you ever have those days where it feels like everything around you is rotten?

It is often difficult to shake such feelings but Judaism provides us a beautiful tool to remind us of the purity of our soul and of all those around us. The Elohai Nishamah prayer is great for connecting and reminding ourselves of the good within us and others.

Notes for facilitator:

The blessing of Asher Yatzar

Several times every day we have an opportunity to express our gratitude to God for the wonderful working of our body when we say the blessing Asher Yatzar after relieving ourselves. Asher Yatzar is the blessing that our Sages instituted over the wisdom in the design of man's body and the wonders of its functioning. After relieving ourselves, cleaning our bodies and washing our hands, we must pause for a moment from all our activities and focus exclusively on saying the blessing, reflecting on God's wonders and expressing our gratitude for them.

A number of sources mention that recital of the blessing of Asher Yatzar with attention to its meaning is itself conducive to good health. When a person is aware of and appreciates the kindness someone does him, the benefactor is happy to shower him with even more kindness. How much more so will God, whose goodness is unending, increase His goodness and kindness to us if we truly appreciate them.

Often people begin to appreciate health more when, unfortunately, it is lacking, forcing them to pray and expend great effort in trying to restore it. It is better to invest in expressing thanks in Asher Yatzar for what God has already given us rather than to have to ask for it back if 'God forbid' we lose it. In Asher Yatzar our Sages provided us with a beautiful way of expressing our thanks to God for the wonderful body He has given us.

Question:

Can you think of any other situations in which we give thanks for basic things which might have a spiral effect by making us feel more proud and happy to have that right? (for example, grace after meals, giving someone a present.)

7. Sikkum/Conclusion (5 minutes):

Judaism and sport are connected, a Jewish parent must teach their child to swim. Whether you interpret this as a metaphor for survival or take it literally they are both valid and relevant.

Each of us is created in the Divine image. It is natural for us to want to be attractive to others and to be noticed by those around us. Judaism does not have an idealized model of beauty. We are all created in God's image. In all our diversity, we are all equally God's creations.

We have identified that Jewish tradition regards the body as a precious gift to us from God, therefore we must care for our bodies. This very much agrees with the Christian idea of 'your body is a temple.'

Allow the last few minutes for questions and answers.